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THE SOCIAL QUESTION OF TODAY

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"To all thoughtful and discerning men," says an English writer, "it should now be clear that the solution of the social question is the great task which has been laid upon the present epoch in the history of the world."¹ Disraeli said: "The social question is today only a zephyr which rustles the leaves, but it will soon become a hurricane."² This prophecy seems likely to be fulfilled. The clouds of social discontent have long been gathering. It is a dull ear that cannot now hear mutterings of a coming storm. Forewarned, however, we are told is forearmed. We may therefore indulge the hope that when the storm strikes, if strike it does, the Ship of State will not be taken unawares, but will be prepared to receive it and weather it out. But if this is so, it will be because of the warnings of social barometry have been not merely noted by a few minds, but also heeded by the people generally. It will be because there has been much general study of the social question.

Although literally hundreds of books, pamphlets, and articles have been published on "The Social Question," or titles which mean the same thing, the phrase conveys to the mind of the average person no definite conception, and is used for the most part to cover vagueness or confusion of thought. A discussion, then, which aspires to be popularly helpful may as well begin at the beginning and state the question, if possible, in easily comprehensible terms.

"The social question" is a phrase that has a double meaning. It is applied first, to the general and eternal question of social well-being. So understood, the social question involves a multi-

¹ Kirkup, *History of Socialism*, Preface.

² See Stein, *Die sociale Frage im Lichte der Philosophie*, French translation, p. 126.

tude of questions, political, moral, social, and industrial. Ruskin formulated it as the question of ordering the lives of the members of society so as to maintain the largest number of noble and happy human beings. Mr. John A. Hobson, a sympathetic critic of Ruskin, expands this statement into the following form: "Given a number of human beings, with a certain development of physical and mental faculties and of social institutions, in command of given natural resources, how can they best utilize these powers for the attainment of the most complete satisfaction?"³

Conceived in this general way, it is inept, of course, to talk of solving the social question. A solution can only be approximated. Ferdinand Lassalle said that he never made use of the expression "solution of the social problem;" for, said he, "the transformation of society will be the work of centuries and of a series of measures and reforms which will grow out of each other organically."⁴ Lassalle was evidently thinking of the social question in its general aspect. And so when it is said, as it sometimes is said, that the social question can never be settled until human nature is transformed, or until the principles of Christianity have taken their rightful place as the basis for all human relationships, it is the general social question that is before the mind.

There is, however, another and a specific meaning sometimes ascribed to the social question which makes it possible to speak of a solution, and rational to expect it. The question generally considered is, as we have just suggested, a whole congeries of problems, administrative, economic, judiciary, political, educational, scientific, industrial, agricultural, hygienic, philanthropic, aesthetic, and moral. But there is almost always some special social question that is to the fore. Some special obstacle blocks social progress, giving rise to the question of its removal. This question is, for the time, the important question. Further social progress demands and requires its solution. It is *the* social question. The general social question is a question for all time; the special social question is for one time only, and human intelligence may settle it forever. In this sense there need be no hesitancy in

³ *The Social Problem*, p. 7.

⁴ See Waurin, *La question sociale*, p. 17.

speaking of a solution of the social question. We propose to discuss this question as it presents itself today.

The social question is always a question of removing some obstacle to progress. Now, the obstacles in the way of social advancement are of two kinds, natural and artificial—those which nature places in the way, and those which arise from the ignorance and selfishness of man. When the Pilgrims landed on the bleak and inhospitable shores of New England, fell upon their knees, and, as Evarts said, got up and fell upon the aborigines, the chief obstacles before them were those presented by the topographic and climatic features of the country. Today, however, the wilderness has been subdued, desert regions have been reclaimed, and steam and electricity harnessed to the car of Progress. The most serious obstacles remaining are those due to the ignorance and selfishness of individuals and social institutions. It is among these artificial obstacles that we must look for the occasion of the social question of today.

Ignorance and selfishness are, of course, as old as the race. Selfishness, however, manifests itself in domination and in privilege, and these are supported by ignorance. Once get a privilege established and the conservatism of ignorance will tend to uphold it. "It is truly wonderful to a philosophic mind," says an anonymous writer, "what unanimity of speech and action can be evoked from mankind in favor of what is. No matter how irrational, how inconvenient, how injurious, how flagrantly monstrous even a thing may be, if it is actually existent, and can boast of antiquity, however limited, the whole world will rush to its defense."⁵ History illustrates the truth of this. Its course has been about as follows: The selfishness of the strong or the cunning takes the earliest opportunity to organize and intrench itself in the most available institution. Here the few flourish and, for a time, perform a valuable social function. They luxuriate, grow corrupt, and, drunk with power, indulge in excesses which arouse the many to a sense of injustice. A struggle ensues, ending in the popular conquest of the oppressive institution. Selfishness is driven out, to reintrench itself on other vantage ground; and the

⁵ Quoted in *The Social Horizon*, p. 80.

same process is repeated. The social question is always a question of the many against the few, and manifests itself invariably in a struggle over some form of institution; that is to say, a class-struggle.

To illustrate the truth of this, as well as to show how the social question changes its aspect from time to time, let us look a little more closely at the history of the past.

In the early stages of social development man was extremely superstitious. His ideas were almost wholly theological. He was, as Huxley says, "a prey to blind impulses, and a victim of endless illusions which made his mental existence a terror and a burden and filled his physical life with barren toil and battle." He was consequently most easily ruled through his fear of the gods. The Church, therefore, became the most powerful of institutions. It held the keys of heaven and hell. It had the power to bind and to loose. What more natural than that the exercise of such power should lead to selfishness, or that the supremely selfish and ambitious should gain control of the institution? This, as everybody knows, is precisely what happened. The Church became grossly corrupt and oppressive. Heresy—that is to say, independent thinking—was the unpardonable sin. The people, slowly increasing in intelligence, grew restive, and here and there broke out in open revolt. The interests and influences of the ecclesiastics were inimical to change, hence they blocked the pathway of progress. For centuries the most urgent demand of the people was for religious freedom, freedom from the palsying hand of the Church. The social question was a religious question. When Luther, Zwingli, and their associates inaugurated the Reformation of the sixteenth century, they began the closing act of the great historical drama of the struggle for religious liberty. Even yet men are not altogether free from ecclesiastical domination, but the power of the Church is broken, and the social question is no longer primarily religious.

The conquest of religious freedom, however, did not destroy human selfishness. Driven from one stronghold, it sought refuge and opportunity in another. That other was the Government, also a necessary institution with a great historic mission, but

affording the next best opportunity for domination and the enjoyment of privilege. The people soon found that the power formerly wielded by the ecclesiastic was now lodged in the hands of the political potentate. The crozier had but transformed itself into the scepter. Hence the battle had to be fought over again. A social movement, more or less conscious, and manifesting itself spasmodically in uprisings and revolutions, took place, culminating in a modification of the power of the ruling class, as in England and Germany, or in a nominal democracy, as in France and the United States. During all this period the dominant interest of the people was in matters pertaining to political control. Their greatest need was political freedom. The social question was a political question.

Of course, it cannot be said that there is even yet anywhere complete political freedom. Kings and emperors still claim to rule by the grace of God and talk of "my people." Fully half of mankind, the "better half," are still in a condition of political subserviency; and even where democracy is most vaunted men are still dominated by "the boss," or are the subjects of their own blind partisanship. Still, for all that, the more civilized nations have passed out of the shadow of political oppression. It is not true of Russia, and it is but partially true of other European countries, but it is practically true of the United States. From the political situation of the time of Frederick the Great, who looked upon the people as upon the deer of his park; or the days of Bonaparte, who regarded men as food for powder, down to the democracy of Jefferson who demanded "equal privileges for all and special privileges to none;" or of Lincoln, who declared that God must love the common people because he made so many of them, is a long journey, but it has been made. Opening out before us there lies still the long and steep pathway leading to ideal political conditions in which there will be no common people, because there will be no invidious distinctions. But the main question with us is not one of political liberty. The social question is no longer primarily a political question.

Religious and political freedom having been practically achieved by the close of the eighteenth century, so far at least as

the more advanced nations are concerned, we should expect to find the dominating spirit and selfishness of men next manifesting themselves in the most available institution. The power of the Church was weakened, and that of the State distributed. But there had been growing up during the second half of the eighteenth century an institution which, as a means of control, and privilege, was to become more potent than Church or State. That institution was Capitalism, or, speaking generally, the industrial institution. Hitherto privilege had relied on the religious fears and beliefs of men, and on the repression of political opinion. It now found at its hand an instrument whereby it could maintain itself by controlling men through their material means of existence. Nothing more natural than that it should be used. The evolution of our modern industrial system has been accompanied by increasing despotic use of the power it has placed in the hands of those who control it. John Stuart Mill saw the drift of things, and foretold the resultant character of the social problem. "The social problem of the future," he said, "we considered to be how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action with a common ownership in the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labor."⁶ He realized that the social problem was to become an economic question. The event justifies his prediction. "The social question," says Professor Adolph Wagner, in an oft-quoted passage, "comes of the consciousness of a contradiction between economic development and the social ideal of liberty and equality which is being realized in political life."⁷ That is, the social question is no longer political, but economic. We read today that one man controls this, that, or the other industry, or that a few men are masters of half the railroads in the country. This is but to say that power has concentrated in the hands of those who have secured possession of the instruments of production, and in some cases that power is greater than that formerly wielded by kings and emperors. It would be a miracle if this power were not abused. That it has been, no one will deny. In many cases the new rulers are

⁶ *Autobiography* (London, 1873), p. 232.

⁷ *Lehrbuch der politischen Oekonomie* (second edition, 1876), p. 36.

only shrewd manipulators of economic distribution. They regard their own interests as primary, their immediate welfare as superior to the public weal. Hence "soulless corporation" and "greedy trust" have become common phrases. Corporations, trusts, and combinations, whatever may be said of their inherent social possibilities, are the instruments laid hold of to maintain and augment the power of a few men. They are social factors of great potentiality, but they are today employed primarily for private advantage. The benefits which accrue to society are considerable, but they are incidental. Their main purpose is to promote the power of the few by skilful manipulation of the industrial and business forces. Says Professor Ward:

Those engaged in the distribution of wealth come in contact with such large amounts that they cannot resist the inclination to absorb into their own possession a proportion greater than is sufficient to constitute a just compensation for their labor. Neither have the means been yet devised to prevent this. To do so is the problem of social economy. The combinations, co-operations, and monopolies already established by shrewd distributors of wealth have become so extensive and complicated that it may require a general social revolution to overthrow them. These industries have absorbed the most acute minds of the world, because they were the levers of power which intellectual force could lay hold of. They have maintained their grasp by dint of every available form of deception, misrepresentation, and strategy, which is all within the legitimate sphere of natural law. The most potent of all the influences wielded by them is that of securing the acquiescence of the victims—for it is a thankless task to labor for the emancipation of a willing slave. This object the distributors of wealth have accomplished by the manufacture of a public sentiment favorable to their interests. This has been done so successfully that, in this age of pretended practical life, any remark bearing upon the greatest economic problem of society—viz., the equitable remuneration of labor and distribution of wealth—is at once branded as "socialistic" and "visionary," as well by those who suffer as by those who profit by this state of things.⁸

The seat of power, then, the opportunity for selfish domination, and the source of oppression are today in our industrial institutions. These institutions themselves, like the Church and the State, have performed a great mission. Those in control of them, the capitalist class, have rendered the world a great service by developing and organizing the material forces of production. But here, as in the preceding dominant institutions, the tempta-

⁸ *Dynamic Sociology*, Vol. I, pp. 577, 578.

tion to the misuse of power were too great. Oppression has resulted, followed by agitation. There is in all lands a social movement in the direction of securing popular control of industry, manifesting itself in either a demand for public regulation of great industries or for public management, or in the more extreme form of socialism, that is, a demand for the social ownership and control of all the material means of production. The social question has become an economic question, a question of economic freedom. It is the question of securing the management of our industrial institutions in the interest of the people as a whole.

The social question, then, has passed through two phases, the religious and the political, and is now in a third, namely, the economic.⁹ It is today, as it has always been, a question of popular freedom, a question of democracy. Many of the struggles of the past for religious and political power have borne no conscious relation to the social question. They were merely attempts at settling disputes which had arisen between rival factions of the dominant class that were of no particular interest to the people, because to them they meant at most only a change of masters. The freedom, which is the immediate object of the social movement, is today, as it has always been, freedom from selfish domination.

Now, it is not to be denied that domination, even class domination, is sometimes beneficial. It has been a factor in social progress. "The whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of the primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership)," says the famous Manifesto of 1848, "has been a history of class-struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes."¹⁰ There is truth in this. The struggle of classes, like the conflicts between contiguous tribes or races, has contributed to progress. Says Herbert Spencer:

⁹ Ferri mentions another phase, the civil. See his *Socialism and Science*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels; authorized English translation, Preface.

We must recognize the truth that the struggles for existence between societies have been instrumental to their evolution. Neither the consolidation and reconsolidation of small groups into large ones; nor the organization of such compound and doubly compound groups; nor the concomitant developments of those aids to a higher life which civilization has brought; would have been possible without inter-tribal and inter-national conflicts. Social co-operation is initiated by joint defense and offense; and from the co-operation thus initiated all kinds of co-operations have arisen. Inconceivable as have been the horrors caused by this universal antagonism which, beginning with the chronic hostilities of small hordes tens of thousands of years ago, has ended in the occasional vast battles of immense nations, we must nevertheless admit that without it the world would still have been inhabited only by men of feeble types, sheltering in caves and living on wild food.¹¹

And so class struggle and class-domination have been means of social development. In certain critical periods of society, say in war, it is an advantage to have the reins of power in the hands of a class that will organize the society for military purposes. Such organization implies the subordination of the many, and their obedience to the ruling authority. The great danger comes, however, after the crisis is passed, and when social existence and advancement no longer require the dominance of a particular class, or the exercise by it of exclusive privileges. This danger manifests itself in an undue conservatism on the part of those who profit by the existing condition of affairs, and by the oppression of the lower classes as soon as they begin to manifest indications of a revolt against the injustices practiced upon them. This disposition of the ruling class to maintain itself in its dominant position follows not so much from its superior selfishness as from the instinct of self-preservation. It is an illusion to suppose that one class in society is animated by the spirit of selfishness and greed, while another class alone is virtuous and heroic. Selfishness is a principle of human nature, due to the circumstances and exigencies under which man has developed, and this principle will manifest itself whenever and wherever there is irresponsible power and privilege. Selfishness becomes more assertive and conspicuous in a class the power and privilege of which are challenged. In such a class the temptation to employ unjust methods in its own behalf becomes unusually strong. And

¹¹ *Principles of Sociology*, Vol. II, p. 241.

when we look back over history, we find that in almost every instance it has yielded to the temptation.

Among the methods employed by the ruling classes in history to preserve their exclusive privileges and to maintain themselves in their dominant position is, in the first place, the awakening of the fear of the lower orders by punishment for the violation of codes, which codes are always consciously or unconsciously inspired in the interests of the social classes which direct the State.¹² Armies have been organized ostensibly for the purpose of defending the society against a foreign foe, but they have been used to prevent a rising of the people. Even the religious element in the nature of man has been made to play an important part in preserving the relative position of the classes; for the people were led to believe that for any attempt to secure a share of the privileges of the dominant class they would be punished, not only in this life, but also in the life to come.

Again, the dominant classes have always endeavored to pervert the egoism of the lower classes and thus make them believe that it was to their advantage to be ruled. "Kings bestride the necks of their people," said Abraham Lincoln, "not because they want to do it, but because the people are better off for being ridden." Naturally the agencies for molding public opinion have been in the hands of the dominant classes, and they have not failed to employ them. A public sentiment favorable to their interests has been developed and maintained. This is why the idea of divine right has been so long-lived. The idea that God looks with peculiar favor upon a monarchy in comparison with other forms of government, and that accession by primogeniture is peculiarly sacred, antedates both the Christian and the Mosaic dispensations. This idea that some men are born to lord it over others has always been an effective instrument for maintaining the domination of the ruling class. Even today the intelligent citizen must carefully examine all appeals to his patriotism to see whether there is not lurking behind the appeal the mere desire to utilize his patriotism in maintaining the position of those in power—that is to say, for partisan instead of patriotic purposes.

¹² See Loria, *Economic Foundations of Society*, p. 135.

Finally, the dominant classes have naturally enough opposed the advancement of knowledge among the lower classes. Knowledge is the foe of privilege. The instinct of self-preservation led even the Church to oppose education in science, or to direct it into "safe" channels. From the dawn of history when, according to the story, our first parents were prohibited from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, down to the time when the attitude of the ecclesiastics provoked the saying that "ignorance is the mother of devotion," the Church was hostile to scientific knowledge. Even in recent times a bishop of the English church could declare, in the presence of a large assemblage, that he could find nothing in either the Old or the New Testament which warranted him in paying deference to mere intellect. Galileo was compelled to bow the knee before the Inquisitorial Court at Rome and solemnly recant his teaching that the sun is the center of our system and the earth revolves around it; and Professor Huxley, for his sincere advocacy of the evolutionary hypothesis, was publicly ridiculed by a bishop of the Church and taunted with being the descendant of a monkey. Professor Huxley, however, had the wit to hurl back the deserved and withering retort that he would rather be the descendant of an animal of low intelligence and of stooping gait, that grins and chatters as you pass, than to be the descendant of a man, endowed with great eloquence and occupying a splendid position, who would prostitute these gifts in a skilful appeal to religious prejudice for the purpose of obscuring the truth.¹³ There is something of this same spirit manifested today when a man, by giving honest utterance to well-established results of modern biblical criticism, calls down upon himself the scathing denunciation of those whose love of truth is outweighed by their fear that certain interests supposed by them to be sacred and important may be jeopardized by the advancement of knowledge. Ecclesiastical or political, the dominant class has opposed the advancement of knowledge when such advancement threatened its privileges. History records the tardiness of the political authorities in providing

¹³ See *Life and Letters of Thomas H. Huxley*, Vol. I, chap. 14, in which several reports of Huxley's famous reply to Bishop Wilberforce are given.

opportunity for the education of the common people. No serious attempt was made in England by the ruling classes until 1832 to facilitate the education of the people, and education was not made national and compulsory until 1867.¹⁴ It would not have been made so then, perhaps, had it not been for the fact that the power of the people began to be feared, and, as Lord Sherbrooke expressed it in 1870, the ruling class felt that they "must educate their masters."

These are some of the methods which have been employed in the past to preserve the dominant class in its position of dominance. It cannot be denied that the temptation to employ similar methods for similar purposes presents itself now to the class occupying the dominant position. Will it continue to yield to this temptation and provoke a struggle such as has hitherto almost invariably accompanied the transfer of power from the few to the many? The experience of the past suggests that in all probability it will. Privilege is dear, and is not often willingly sacrificed. "I do not believe," said Wendell Phillips, "that the upper classes—education, wealth, aristocracy, conservatism—the men that are in, ever yielded except to fear. I think the history of the race shows that the upper classes never granted a privilege to the lower out of love. As Jeremy Bentham says: 'the upper classes never yielded a privilege without being bullied out of it.'"¹⁵ But there is no excuse for the obstinate selfishness of any class today. Justice may be reached by mutual concessions. The method employed in solving the social questions of the past is one to which we need not necessarily resort. Society has arrived at a stage of development in which we have a right to expect that the questions which were formerly fought out may now be thought out. Whatever part physical class-struggle has played in past history, it is not necessary that it continue the same rôle in the future. Intelligence and mutual forbearance will obviate it.

We have now seen that the social question of today is a question arising from a fundamental principle in human nature—namely, selfishness—and taking its form from the character of

¹⁴ See Graham, *The Social Problem* (London, 1886), p. 24.

¹⁵ *Speeches, Lectures and Addresses*, Second Series, p. 121.

the institution through which privilege is acquired and a dominant class established. Eliminate undue selfishness and the question is solved. Destroy all opportunities for selfish domination and we have the same result. There are, then, two objects of attack in every rational attempt to solve the social question—the selfishness of human nature, and our social and industrial organization. Education and religion aim primarily at one; radical social reconstructionists, at the other. Both must be considered. Each may be considered as end or means of the other. But inasmuch as all efforts to transform the character of men must consist in some modification of their environment, it would seem that industrial change is the initial means. Says Hobson:

There are those who seek to retard all social progress by a false and mischievous dilemma which takes the following shape: No radical improvement in industrial organization, no work of social reconstruction, can be of any real value unless it is preceded by such moral and intellectual improvement in the condition of the mass of workers as shall render the new machinery effective; unless the change in human nature comes first, a change in external conditions will be useless. On the other hand, it is evident that no moral or intellectual education can be brought effectively to bear upon the mass of human beings, whose whole energies are necessarily absorbed by the effort to secure the means of bare physical support. Thus it is made to appear as if industrial and moral progress must precede each other, which is impossible. The falsehood in the above dilemma consists in the assumption that industrial reformers wish to proceed by a sudden leap from an old industrial order to a new one. Such sudden movements are not in accordance with the gradual growth which nature insists upon as the condition of wise change. But it is equally in accordance with nature that natural growth precedes the moral. Not that the work of reconstruction can lag far behind. Each step in this industrial advancement of the poor should, and must if the gain is to be permanent, be followed closely, and secured by a corresponding advance in moral and intellectual character and habits. But the moral and religious reformer should never forget that in order of time material reform comes first.¹⁶

This view of Mr. Hobson we believe is correct. Permanent reform, individual or social, must rest upon an economic basis. The social question of today is in a very true sense a question of the stomach. As Amiel said: "The animal in us must be satisfied first, and we must banish from us all suffering which is

¹⁶ *Problems of Poverty*, p. 181.

superfluous and has its origin in social arrangements, before we can return to spiritual goods.”¹⁷ It is as true today as it has ever been that man lives not by bread alone. But it is also true that without bread man cannot live at all, and without a fair share of material comforts he is retarded in his development, and oftentimes prevented from attaining that culture of mind and soul, that sweetness and dignity and happiness of life, which it is his God-given right to enjoy, and for the maintenance and furtherance of which society itself exists.

This, then, is the social question of today: How are the economic institutions of society, in which so much power and privilege are concentrated, and which are essential to the well-being of all, to be organized and conducted so that their benefits may be justly shared by all members of society, and thus the last refuge of the spirit of selfish domination be, like the Church and the State, in the hands of the people? If those now in control of these institutions—that is, the capitalist class—profit by the experience of former institutions that have become dominant and oppressive, they will concede all that justice demands, and the social question will solve itself. If they do not, and set up the present industrial system, capitalism, as an unyielding opponent to change, then they need not be surprised if others manifest toward capitalism the spirit of Cato the Censor, when he cried *Delenda est Carthago!* But then we should no longer have a question, but an issue. Now, while as yet the temper of all classes is comparatively dispassionate, is the time to organize and concentrate the intelligence of all classes upon a rational solution.

Are we in these days of boasted intelligence and prosperity to declare that the question here proposed is unanswerable? Are we to admit that an essential element of our civilization is the inequitable distribution of wealth, and that a great body of people must be forever sunk in degradation and in misery? Are we to assume, as some tacitly and others even openly do, that that part of our population known to the student of social science as the submerged tenth, or the social residuum, is a necessary part of our civilization? If we do, then we must agree with William

¹⁷ *Journal intime*, translation by Mrs. Humphry Ward, p. 18.

Morris who declared that, if this is so, then our civilization carries with it the poison which is ultimately to destroy it. "If," said he, "society does not aim at getting rid of this misery and giving some share in the happiness and dignity of life to *all* the people it has created, and which it spends such unwearying energy in creating, it is simply an organized injustice, a mere instrument for oppression, so much the worse than that which has gone before it, as its pretensions are higher, its slavery subtler, its mastery harder to overthrow, because supported by such a dense mass of commonplace well-being and comfort." But we are not reduced to the necessity of making this admission. Intelligence is able to solve all social questions. There is only the matter of its application. The forces which have brought society to its present degree of civilization will in the future, if aided by higher and higher degrees of individual and social intelligence, carry us onward and upward to heights of civilization yet undreamed of.